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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to examine the instructional potential of six educational television programs designed to teach world history to high school students. Each of the six programs encapsulates the events of a given century as if it were a 15-minute evening newscast, providing interviews with famous figures, dramatic moments in history captured on tape, human interest stories, and debates on significant issues. The survey was distributed to 363 students from four high schools in the Midwest. Participants were supplied with a series of statements about the show and asked to respond to each on a Likert scale; scores were then averaged for each item. Results indicate that students felt the series was entertaining (1.01), interesting (1.24), and amusing (.99). In addition, students agreed that the programs could be used along with their current world history text (1.19), and they preferred seeing the programs to reading about the same events in a book (1.22). Findings suggest that a newscast style program has instructional potential in the classroom as it may create a context that seems more "real" to the viewer than the average docudrama. It is pointed out that the global perspective allowed by the "Newscast" series may be an especially valuable aspect as its use can contribute to a greater understanding of historically significant global trends. A list of references is provided. (JB)

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"Newscast From the Past": A Dynamic New TV Series
with a Global Perspective on World History

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What if you had a special television set that you

could turn on to see Joan of Arc in full battle regalia
leading the French into battle, or Galileo sighting the
moons of Jupiter in that new invention the telescope, or
Martin Luther arguing with Church authorities about the
sale of indulgences? Would you tune in?

Few would be able to resist such an opportunity to
peer into the past. The closest thing to such a device
is currently available to teachers on the "Newscast From the
Past" television series. The Black Death sweeps across
Europe, Gengis Khan's barbarians terrorize the peoples of
Asia, Copernicus proposes the radical idea that the sun is
the center of the solar system, Hernando Cortez marches upon
the mighty Aztec Empire with his small band of Spaniards, and
Mughal emperor Shah Jahan constructs the magnificent Taj
Mahal in memory of his beloved wife.

Each of the six programs encapsulates the events
of a given century as if it were a fifteen minute evening
newscast. The telecasts are delivered by an anchorman and a
team of "on-the-scene" reporters, covering their stories from
remote corners of the world. They include interviews with
famous figures, dramatic moments in history captured on tape,

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"human interest" stories, debates on significant issues of the time, and even some commercials for new products of the day.

While reminiscent of Walter Cronkite's "You Are There," the "Newscast From the Past" differs from this previous series in several key respects. For a full half hour, "You Are There" focused upon a single major event from the relatively recent past, usually an incident from American history. It approximated the documentary genre more closely than it did the television news. On the other hand, "Newscast From the Past" more closely imitates the news telecast format, and it deals with worldwide events in the medieval period. Although its treatment of specific events is more superficial than the coverage was on "You Are There," the scope of "Newscast" is far more global and the breadth of history that it encompasses is far more extensive.

"Newscast From the Past" was produced at KLRU-TV, the Public Broadcasting Service affiliate in Austin, Texas. It was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The series was written by a team of scriptwriters and historians, who carefully monitored its content for historical accuracy. The final scripts were also mailed to reputable historians across the nation to doublecheck their accuracy. The program's six figure budget was large by educational television standards, and the production has a very professional look. A feature

film director was placed in charge of the shooting, and he successfully orchestrated a set of convincing performances on sets filled with realistically medieval looking paraphernalia.

The high quality of this production was acknowledged by educators across the country during the so-called "Firstview" sessions, conducted by the Public Broadcasting Service to determine what programming should be made available on the school instructional television schedule. "Newscast From the Past" was voted first in this poll, as the new program that most deserved to be placed on the schedule. Furthermore, because it was produced with Corporation for Public Broadcasting funds, "Newscast" will legally be in the public domain for three years. This means that PBS affiliates will not have to pay the usual fees to broadcast it. "Newscast" is therefore a high quality bargain for local PBS stations, and consequently it is being widely aired throughout the country.

Public domain status also means that the programs can be videotaped off the air and used for instructional purposes from now until the end of the 1988 school year, without any of the usual copyright restrictions. Videotape distribution of the series will be forthcoming in the near future. A forty page teachers' guide to "Newscast" is available for \$2.25 from KLRU-TV in Austin, Texas (see the address at the end of this article). Already over 15,000 of these have been distributed to state education departments and public

television stations throughout the country, from New Jersey to California and from Alaska to Texas.

The Problematic Nature of World History Instruction

A survey I conducted a few years ago revealed abysmally low percentages of high school students able to identify twenty of the most influential figures in history on a simple matching exercise.¹

These twenty men were taken from a list that included Jesus Christ, Sir Isaac Newton, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, Einstein, Marx, and Columbus.² Why is it often so difficult to interest adolescents in world history?

Unfortunately, history is often taught with an emphasis upon obscure facts and figures. Why should today's teenagers be expected to memorize the precise year of the Council of Trent, the victor of the Battle of Tours, or the site of the Magna Charta signing? World history can become a "trivial pursuit" when it should be a meaningful one. While probably more worthwhile, the conceptual approach to history instruction may be no more inspiring. Lengthy lists of causes and results can remain meaningless abstractions to pupils unless they have carefully studied the circumstances involved.

Ideally, historical study will move students through several stages of awareness. First they will learn what took place (perhaps even exploring the difficulties encountered by

historians in trying to establish what actually did transpire). Next they will assimilate and synthesize this material, so that they can begin to understand why events unfolded as they did. Then students should start to draw their own conclusions about the past. Finally, they will hopefully apply what they have learned to present day situations. The lessons that history has to offer should help young people develop their own political views, and empower them to make thoughtful decisions based upon an expanded awareness that ranges far beyond the limits of their own personal experiences. Yet none of this personal growth will occur if a student is not interested in the historical events themselves. Motivation is, therefore, a critical issue.

What can excite students about the study of history? One successful approach is to relate fascinating stories about personalities of other eras and faraway cultures. History can captivate in the same way that literature does, (and it possesses the added allure of having really happened). But a solid history course must also be more than a scholastic "Ripley's Believe It or Not." It will hopefully convey some sense of what life was like in previous times. Like fine literature, it should transport the student into other worlds. Teenagers can imagine themselves in the stately Roman forum, the opulent court of Louis XIV, a clammy dungeon during the Spanish Inquisition, Magellan's weathered

galleon, etc.

For most high school history students, it is very difficult to accurately picture such scenes, because the information provided by the textbook is so limited. In trying to survey all of human history, descriptions of previous eras are sketchy at best. Some teachers can bring certain historical periods to life, but in many cases, pupils remain bored with the subject because they cannot relate to it. Yet these same students will sit for hours in front of their television sets at home, watching Marlon Brando play Mark Anthony, Napoleon, or Fletcher Christian.

As John Dewey so often asserted, experience is a critical factor in a young person's education.³ Film and television have the capability of re-creating the past, and thereby provide vicarious experiences that involve the learner. It is in this capacity that "Newscast From the Past" can make a significant contribution to a world history course. To see how effective the series may be in this regard, a survey was developed.

The "Newscast" Survey

How effective has the use of historical drama on film (or videotape) proven to be in social studies classrooms? The general instructional efficacy of film and television in the classroom has been well documented in a variety of research studies, dating back many decades.⁴ In fact, respected media

researcher William Allen wrote in the late 1950's, that, for factual material, "in about 85 percent of the studies comparing motion picture teaching with conventional methods, films were found to be significantly superior."⁵

The landmark studies into the use of films in history classes were conducted many years ago by researchers at Yale University. A 1928 study conducted in a junior high school American history class showed a filmed series of "photoplays" entitled, "The Chronicles of America."⁶ A rigorous replication using the same films was carried out ten years later?⁷ Both studies found significant learning gains for students who viewed the film series, over a control group that received conventional instruction. It was also shown that pupils who saw the films became more interested in the subject matter. More recently, studies on teaching history with televised material have yielded similar results. One carefully documented example was the favorable set of reactions to the classroom use of a television series entitled "American Cultural Heritage."⁸

However, the actual number of quantitative investigations conducted on the effectiveness of using film or television to teach history is rather small. As such, it seemed appropriate to test reactions to the "Newscast From the Past" programs. A survey was developed to examine a variety of issues related to the instructional potential of this series. How appealing is it to the primary target

audience, high school world history students? How easily might it be included in the typical world history curriculum? How effective will it be in providing a more meaningful sense of history to young people?

The survey was distributed to 363 students from four high schools in the Midwest. While the student sample was not scientifically selected, there was an effort made to obtain a representative cross-section of students by including four distinctly different types of schools in the study. These sites included an upper middle class suburban school, an inner-city magnet school, a parochial school, and a vocational school. Students were given a series of statements about the show, and were asked to respond to each on a Likert scale. Scores were averaged for each item. Tabulated results are listed in the table of "Survey Ratings."

Survey Ratings

Rating scale: 2 = strongly agree
 1 = agree
 0 = neutral,
 -1 = disagree
 -2 = strongly disagree

"Newscast From the Past" was entertaining.	1.01
Seeing historical events acted out was interesting.	1.24
Certain historical personalities "came to life" for me.	.55
The program did a good job of presenting the sights and sounds of the Middle Ages.	1.10

The TV news format helped make the historical events seem real (as if they really happened).	.99
History is more interesting when presented as if it is current news.	1.14
I was amused at the idea of historical figures appearing on a modern medium like TV.	.99
I feel that a series of programs like this would help make a unit on the Middle Ages more interesting.	1.34
I think that "Newscast" programs could conveniently be used along with the world history text my class is using.	1.19
The program provided some special perspectives on the time period because it portrays the era differently than the impression given in the textbook.	.55
I prefer seeing "Newscast From the Past" to reading about the same events in a book.	1.22
I would like to read more about some of the events reported on the show.	.21
The program provided some special perspectives on how dramatically the world has changed since the Middle Ages.	.95
The program provided some special perspectives on how some aspects of life on this planet never change.	.41
The program suggested some lessons that history has to offer.	.48
The newscast included some people whom I admire (and hope to fashion myself after).	-.33
The program provided some special perspectives on what was simultaneously happening all over the world during a given period of history.	.70

Historical Drama as an Instructional Approach

Historical fiction has always been a popular film genre, from Cecil B. DeMille's biblical extravaganzas to present day television "docudramas" about recent historical figures and events. The "Newscast" series uses this popular approach to portray famous moments and significant figures as accurately as possible. In doing so, it hopes to educate as it entertains. But the first issue is whether it succeeds as a dramatic production.

Students agreed with the item "'Newscast From the Past' was entertaining," which obtained a rating of 1.01. In this age of bloated budgets and slick video production techniques, it is no small accomplishment for an educational program to receive such a positive response from today's generation of adolescents, who are teased, titillated, and tranquilized by the media on a daily basis. An entertaining program, will, at least, tend to hold the class' attention, the first prerequisite for learning.

But getting a group of young people really interested in history is a difficult challenge. Adolescents are notoriously egocentric. Their concerns extend, at best, to an immediate peer group, but seldom beyond. Asking them to consider the tribulations of another society several centuries ago can be frustrating. Nor do young people often have a clear sense of their own personal history. In later adult life, we can reflect back upon the events and

decisions that influenced our lives. Such recollections can take on a personal meaning for us, and an appreciation of one's own "history" develops. Yet, for most teenagers, these perspectives are years away. Furthermore, an interest in history naturally arises among members of the older generation, because they actually remember events now considered "historical." Young people have none of these advantages when it comes to finding meaningful lessons in the study of history.

Therefore, it was extremely encouraging to see that students felt very strongly on the survey that "Seeing historical events acted out was interesting" (rating of 1.24). This result alone perhaps should merit the use of "Newscast" in classrooms across the nation. Another issue, whether "Certain historical personalities 'came to life' for me" during the show, received moderate support (.55). In this case, the brevity of most of the appearances on camera may have limited the impact of these performances. Considerably greater support was given the statement, "The program did a good job of presenting the sights and sounds of the Middle Ages" (1.10).

If, during the show, students experience the "atmosphere" of medieval times, perhaps, ensuing discussions will be more meaningful to them. The deplorable standards of living, the vulnerability to disease, the widespread illiteracy, and other fundamental

aspects of Medieval life are effectively portrayed in "Newscast". Students can begin to comprehend how their ancestors lived, and then place the events and issues of that period in the proper context.

In fact, perhaps this program can overcome some of the aforementioned problems that students have in relating to a previous historical era. It's often difficult for them to imagine what life was like, and consequently the lists of names and dates, causes and effects, winners and losers, and so on, remain dry abstractions. In viewing the newscasts, students felt that "The TV news format helped make the historical events seem more real (as if they really happened)" (.99). If "Newscast" successfully communicates the sense that the names in their text were living, breathing human beings who struggled with the challenges of life, just like the rest of us, then it has taken its audience through the first critical steps towards greater involvement. Teenagers can begin to contemplate how other people throughout history have dealt with life's problems, and, in so doing, may begin to reflect more carefully upon themselves, their own aspirations, their own strengths, their own weaknesses, and their own unique ways of dealing with the world.

The Newscast as an Instructional Format

"Newscast From the Past" takes advantage of an instructional format that young people have become accustomed

to learning from. Many students in this study agreed with the survey item "I generally watch at least part of a nightly news program several times a week" (.54). The potential of the television newscast as an information source has been studied extensively in the past few decades. Well educated subjects have recalled detail on approximately fifty to sixty percent of the items on a news telecast,⁹ although retention rates have been considerably lower for audiences tested under non-laboratory conditions.¹⁰ Several studies have shown that the visual material provided on television news programs aids recall of information,¹¹ and that motion pictures are more effective in this regard than stills.¹² Viewers general overall knowledge of current events has been positively correlated with their ability to recall specific facts included in a telecast,¹³ and those that watch newscasts in order "to become informed" recall significantly more than those who watch "casually" or "to relax."¹⁴

These findings suggest that a newscast style program has instructional potential in the classroom. Learning gains from news broadcasts have been rather significant under "supervised" conditions and classroom viewing is certainly supervised. Furthermore, "informed" viewers demonstrate higher learning gains than uninformed viewers, and attentive students in the middle of a history course would hopefully already be somewhat knowledgeable about the material from their readings and discussions.

Student reactions to the use of a news telecast format to depict events in world history were obtained on a number of survey items. The statement "History is more interesting when presented as if it is current news" attained a strong rating of 1.14. Is it the inherent appeal of the evening news format, with its fast paced mix of film footage and commentary that involves the student audience? This could not be the sole explanation, for the statement "I normally enjoy watching nightly news programs on TV" rated only a .32 level of agreement.

Perhaps, more significant is the novel twist that the "Newscast From the Past" series gives to this standard television format. The survey statement "I was amused at the idea of historical figures appearing on a modern medium like TV" received a rating of .99. Repeated observation of groups watching the show for the first time confirms this "novelty" factor, for the majority of faces in the audience invariably become animated as an historical figure is interviewed by a reporter.

Why should "Newscast From the Past" elicit such a pleasantly startled response from its audience? After all, people have long become accustomed to watching historical drama on television. It may be that the presence of modern telecommunications equipment in the "Newscast" scenes contributes to this phenomenon. Microphones are thrust at medieval personalities, creating an incongruity that

probably intrigues the audience. This "reverse anachronism" upsets our established conceptions of historical reality. It has the same absurd effect as the "what's wrong with this picture" cartoons we enjoyed as children, in which one object does not belong in the situation.

These modern devices also suggest one of the most tantalizing fantasies of the present century: time travel. From the publication of H. G. Well's classic novelette The Time Machine to the release of Steven Spielberg's current hit film "Back to the Future," the concept of time travel has increasingly come to captivate the public imagination. "Newscast From the Past" implies an accessibility to the intriguing events of the past via modern technology, a magic camera through which we can peer into past eras. This idea undoubtedly has considerable appeal.

Why else might history seem more interesting when presented as if it is current news? Naturally, people will tend to be more interested in today's events than those of the distant past because they are more likely to be affected by them. The public can become conditioned by media formats to react in certain ways, and they generally respond to newscasts with concern. In using this format, a "Newscast From the Past" may benefit from some of this mental conditioning. Through the reports of a news anchorman, the events of the past seem more immediate and compelling.

In addition, the newscast format may create a context that seems more "real" to the viewer than the average docudrama. While film narrative has traditionally been fictional, newscasts have always presented real incidents. The events portrayed on the "Newscast" programs may derive a certain degree of subconscious credibility from the fact that they are reported using all the normal conventions of a news program. This conjecture is supported by the strong agreement, mentioned earlier, with the statement, "The TV news format helped make the historical events seem more real (as if they really happened)."

"Newscast" and the World History Curriculum

Would the "Newscast From the Past" series enhance a high school world history curriculum? The survey item "I feel that a series of programs like this would help make a unit on the Middle Ages more interesting" received a rating of 1.34, the highest score on the entire survey. High school history students would very much like to see this series included as part of their coursework.

But did they feel that the programs could effectively compliment the material in their texts? There was clear agreement (1.19) with the statement "I think that 'Newscast' programs could conveniently be used along with the world history text my class is using." Five teachers surveyed on these two items also agreed with them (average rating of 1.00

on both this items and the previous one).

The "Newscast" series can be used in a variety of interesting ways in world history classes. But these programs would probably be best employed as an introduction to the study of various medieval centuries. They provide a stimulating overview with which to begin discussion. Since the newscasts furnish a visual sense of the times, they probably should be shown before students are asked to engage in more abstract activity, like reading or discussion. Then, hopefully, this verbal material will be grounded in some concrete perceptions of what was happening at that time.

In fact, without adequate exposure to visuals characteristic of the period, students may have difficulty forming accurate impressions of what the Middle Ages were like. This problem may be especially severe for poor readers, who have trouble understanding the text. It was interesting that a reasonably large percentage of students agreed with the survey item "The program provided some special perspectives on the time period because it portrays the era differently than the impression given in the textbook" (.55). One has to wonder what some of these pupils imagined about the medieval era before they viewed the show.

The need for visual material in history units is underscored by the strong student support (1.22) for the

survey item "I prefer seeing 'Newscast From the Past' to reading about the same events in a book." The television programs communicate the events of the Middle Ages in a more dynamic way than a textbook can ever hope to. It was felt that the interest generated by the "Newscast" shows might stimulate further reading on medieval topics. However, only some students indicated that "I would like to read more about some of the events reported on the show" (.21).

Conceptual Learning From the "Newscast" Series

In addition to relating interesting facts and providing a feeling for the times, a really dynamic television program about history will deal with important concepts. Items were included in the survey to explore how students perceived their own conceptualizing about history as they watched the newscasts. While these responses are not actual measures of learning, studies have shown that perceptions about how worthwhile a program has been do correlate positively with actual later achievement gains.¹⁵

There was general agreement (.95) that "The program provided some special perspectives on how dramatically the world has changed since the Middle Ages." The series seems to effectively portray how the social, economic, and political circumstances of the medieval period differed from the present situation.

Some students also felt that "The program provided some special perspectives on how some aspects of life on this

planet never change" (.41). There are attempts within "Newscast" episodes implying that certain historical themes persist through the ages. For example, the sixteenth century newscast describes a jungle war in Vietnam and the seventeenth century program reports on the violence in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics.

There was also some support (.48) for the statement "The program suggested some lessons that history has to offer," despite the fact that these surveys were filled out by groups that had not discussed the program. With appropriate teacher follow-up, the responses to this item would probably be even more positive.

Admittedly these questions only superficially explore the issue of how conceptually stimulating the "Newscast" series may be. More specific examination of what pupils are really learning from the series would serve as a worthwhile research endeavor especially given the paucity of data presently available to history teachers on the instructional effectiveness of history drama. Nevertheless, these positive survey responses on crucial pedagogical issues remains encouraging.

However, not so encouraging was the negative pupil reaction (-.33) to the statement, "The newscast included some people whom I admire (and hope to fashion myself after)." Apparently, the heroes of the Middle Ages are truly difficult for modern day adolescents to identify with. Perhaps they

are not portrayed in an attractive enough light. For whatever the reason, "Newscast" failed to inspire its audience in this regard.

But in another important respect, "Newscast" succeeded rather admirably. It was designed to present the major events happening simultaneously all over the world, a kind of horizontal slice of history. There is a need for this approach in most world history curricula, which proceed chronologically for lengthy periods within a given region and later double back to cover the same time frame in another part of the world. Therefore, it is difficult for a student to sense what was actually occurring at the same time in medieval Europe, Kublai Khan's China, the Indian empires of Latin America, the kingdoms of western Africa, the Islamic world, and so on. "Newscast" could fulfill this vital function in world history classrooms, and, in fact, students agreed that "The program provided some special perspectives on what was simultaneously happening all over the world during a given period of history" (.70).

This global perspective is an especially valuable aspect of the "Newscast" series. It indicates the increasing degree of contact which developed between different civilizations, over the centuries, elucidating the effects which cultures on different continents may have had upon one another. "Newscast" can contribute to a greater understanding of historically significant global trends,

such as the spread of major religions, the rise of European imperialism, the development of multi-national business enterprises, the first stirrings of democracy as an internationally significant political movement, the evolution of well established global trading patterns, etc. The series can help establish the larger overall picture, and then the teacher and the text can proceed to fill in the details.

"Newscast From the Past" was greeted with considerable enthusiasm in the history classrooms I surveyed. Its use of a television news format helps bring history to life in ways the lecture or text cannot. It conveys a number of significant historical concepts, and provides a truly global perspective on the major trends in a given century. The "Newscast From the Past" series should be an exciting addition to world history classrooms across the nation.

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